Mentor Wasn't Always Available: Challenges of Pre-Service Teachers on Supported Teaching in Schools

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Abstract: The goal of the study was to identify the difficulties that pre-service teachers encountered while participating in supported teaching in schools. Using a phenomenology design, the study utilized a qualitative approach. Convenience sampling technique was used to sample twenty (20) level 100 pre-service teachers (12 males and 8 females) who were enrolled in a bachelor of education program. Data was gathered through extensive, semi-structured interviews. The majority of the challenges encountered by student-teachers were related to the attitude of the mentors such as mentor absenteeism, mentor lateness, mentor inability to provide student-teachers with necessary information they needed, mentor inability to assist student-teachers, and mentor's lack of devotion for student-teachers. The partner school related challenges identified were: lack of mentors, inadequate curricular materials, inadequate teaching and learning materials, inadequate textbooks, and inadequate furniture in some schools. It was found that majority of mentors in the partner schools had little knowledge of what supported teaching in schools entailed. Thus the mentors found it challenging to give student-teachers the support and direction they needed. In many instances, mentors were unfamiliar with the new Bachelor of Education Curriculum, which made it challenging for them to offer effective and knowledgeable mentorship. Some college tutors did not provide student-teachers with enough assistance through reflection.

Keywords: Teacher Education, Teaching Practice, Pre-Service Teachers, Mentoring, Supported Teaching

1. Introduction

Field experience is an essential component of teacher education programs because experienced teachers guide student-teachers in their classrooms [1]. During field experience, pre-service teachers are given opportunities to practice teaching in a regular school context as part of the teacher education training process [2]. Prerequisite for student-teachers' learning is the availability of effective mentoring. Globally, the idea of student teaching is established to prepare aspiring teachers to teach students of diverse backgrounds and characteristics. Additionally, it is a drive to increase student-teachers' knowledge, professionalism, self-efficacy, and adaptability [3].

Student teaching is the ultimate experience in pre-service teacher education programs around the world [4]. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of teacher education is field experience [5]. The teaching practice course is one of the most important in teacher education programs because it provides pre-service teachers with the chance to identify their strengths, needs, and talents as well as put theory into practice [6]. Thus the effectiveness of teaching practice significantly influences teacher performance [7]. Teaching practice is a crucial component of teacher preparation and offers opportunity for student-teachers to connect theory and practice [8].

Dorsah, Abukari, Tindan and A-Ingkonge [9] reported that pre-service teachers gain many experiences during supported teaching. These include experiences that are related to classroom instruction, inclusive pedagogy, and familiarity with the larger school community. Student-teachers also formed communities of practice and learned how to work

together and share their experiences through peer collaboration [9].

The hallmark of teacher education is the placement of pre-service teachers in classrooms where they interact with kids while being supervised by an experienced teacher [10]. Therefore, without a considerable shift in focus toward preparing teachers to meet the evolving requirements of the school system, efforts to improve education may not be successful [11].

The quality of teaching practice is however the area of teacher education that has received the least attention [12].

2. Problem Statement

The Colleges of Education in Ghana were elevated to four-year degree awarding institutions in 2012 by the Colleges of Education Act 847 [13]. The goal of the B. Ed. curriculum is transform initial teacher education in Ghana and ensure the preparation of highly competent teachers [14].

The National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework (NTECF) and National Teachers' Standards (NTS) were developed by the Ministry of Education and Transforming Teacher Education and Learning (T-TEL) to set minimum professional standards for the teaching profession as well as to guide the development of teacher education programs throughout the nation [13]. The goal was to reform initial teacher education in Ghana on the ground that preparing competent, inspiring, and engaging teachers is a crucial first step in ensuring high-quality education for all students [15].

Thus, the knowledge necessary to obtain the initial teacher qualification in Ghana comprised of four pillars. These include literacy studies (in Ghanaian languages and in English), pedagogical knowledge, subject and curriculum knowledge, and supported teaching in schools [13]. Pre-service teachers now devote a greater portion of their preparation time to supported teaching in schools [14]. Student-teachers spend time in partner schools for three years. This is because supported teaching in schools plays a crucial role in their learning process [13]. Beginning in the first year, student teachers start to gain teaching experience through routine school-based practice where they observe and co-teach with more seasoned in-service teachers [13].

The aim of supported teaching in school was to give student-teachers the opportunity to develop and put their professional beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge into practice. This is to ensure that they gain the pre-requisite qualification to teach. The availability of well-equipped schools, mentors, and strong connections between colleges or universities and the partner schools play a role in achieving this goal [15]. Again, supported teaching in schools aims to develop teachers by involving them in student-supported practicum experiences, school visits, and teaching practice [15]. Emphasis is placed on school-based, organized, and directed learning experiences in schools [14]. However, throughout this professional practice, student teachers encounter some difficulties [16]. What challenges do student-teachers encounter while participating in supported teaching in schools (STS)?

3. Theoretical Framework

The theory of situated learning states that effective learning must be integrated into the social and physical environment, and mediated through connections with others in a community or "community of practice" [17]. Members of a community of practice share and create practices together, receive knowledge through their contacts with other group members, and have opportunity to advance intellectually, professionally, or personally [18]. Situated learning places a strong emphasis on giving students the chance to demonstrate their skills and capabilities [17]. Situated learning stresses that, how much of what is learnt is specific to the environment in which it is taught [19]. Learning requires an authentic, contextualized environment where participants can interact with and reflect on their surroundings [20].

4. Methodology

4.1. Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach using phenomenology design. Phenomenology is the description of a person's experience and emerged from the philosophical perspective that one's lived experience, should serve as the foundation for knowing [21].

Phenomenology provides a comprehensive account of participants' lived experiences of meaning-making and how they perceive the primary object or phenomena [22], and embodied experience is the primary means of understanding reality [23]. The goal of phenomenology is to describe experiences, the "things themselves" [24], and to bring to our attention some past experiences so that we might consider the present significance of these past experiences [25].

4.2. Participants and Sampling

The study participants consisted of twenty (20) level 100 pre-service teachers (12 males and 8 females) who were enrolled in a four-year bachelor of education program in a Ghanaian College of Education. Convenient sampling was used to select the participants.

4.3. Instruments

Data was gathered through extensive, semi-structured interviews. The objective of a qualitative interview is to produce data to better understand social structure and behaviour. The interviews solicited how student-teachers on supported teaching give meaning to particular experiences and challenges [26].

The interviews took place both in-person and online. In-depth interviews performed via computer-mediated communications are known as online interviews or e-interviews [27]. Research found that online asynchronous interviews promises to be good for qualitative research [26].

For the online interviews, participants were asked to give account of their experiences during supported teaching. The questions were created using Google form and administered on WhatsApp group platform and Google Classroom. Examples of the interview questions are:

1) What is supported teaching in schools (STS)?
2) What is the essence of STS?
3) What are the challenges you faced during supported teaching in schools (STS)?
4) How was the reception at the STS partner school?
5) Were you given any induction/orientation by the mentor?
6) If yes, can you describe the nature of the induction?
7) Were you given orientation on the STS by STS coordinator of the college?
8) If yes, what are some of the some of the things you learned about STS?
9) Were you provided with the STS manual?
10) Were you given the STS course outline?
11) Did you know the tutor who would help you do reflection after STS?
12) What is your overall impression about STS?
13) Were you given the necessary support by teachers in your STS partner school?
14) What new thing have you learned during STS?

The interview guide included questions designed to elicit accounts of the challenges student- teachers encountered while on supported teaching in schools.

4.4. Data Collection Procedure

For six weeks, student-teachers took part in supported teaching at partner schools where they were placed by the College. Weekly visits to partner schools allowed them to watch and observe mentors, co-teach, plan, and discuss professional and teaching experiences with mentors, peers and college tutors. Prior to the school visits, the student-teachers were taken through an orientation program and were told about the purpose of STS and what they would be doing at their various partner schools.

Additionally, all essential materials they needed were provided, including an STS guidebook and templates of student reflective journals. After the sixth week of school visits, data was gathered through interviews. The interviews took place both in-person and online. The participants' consent was sought and the goal of the study was explained to the participants. Additionally, anonymity for every participant was assured and they were guaranteed about the privacy of the information [28]. In order to elicit more information, follow-up questions were posed during the in-person interviews.

4.5. Data Analysis

The purpose of qualitative analysis is to take a lot of information that could be difficult to understand and engage with it in a way that helps you make sense of what you found [28]. QDA Miner Lite version 2.0.8 was used to analyse the data. The data was coded and imported case by case into QDA Miner Lite software.

Case-by-case coding of the data was done using significant statements found in the data from participants' lived-experiences. Themes were extracted using thematic analysis. Following the synthesis of these themes, textual and structural descriptions of student teachers' challenges during supported teaching in schools were obtained. Frequencies of significant statements made under the themes were obtained. The results were displayed in charts, tables.

5. Results

The challenges encountered by the pre-service teachers' during STS were categorised into five themes namely: mentor attitude, partner school related challenges, mentor knowledge of supported teaching in schools, mentor knowledge of the curriculum, and college related challenges. The majority of the issues faced by student-teachers stemmed from mentor attitude toward STS (21 significant codes), partner school related issues (21 important codes), and mentor knowledge of STS (16 significant codes). The thematic areas of the challenges and the number of significant codes are displayed in Figure 1.
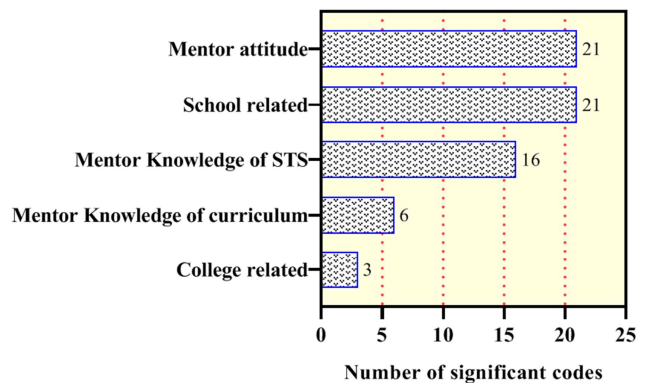

Figure 1. *Major themes of challenges and frequency of significant codes.*

The issues with mentor attitude were related to mentor absenteeism (4 significant codes), mentor lateness (9 significant codes), mentor inability to provide student teachers with necessary information they needed (3 significant codes), mentor inability to assist student-teachers (3 significant codes), and mentor's lack of time for student teachers (2 significant codes).

The challenges that related to the partner schools were: a lack of mentors (3 significant statements), inadequate curricular materials (3 significant statements), inadequate teaching and learning materials (7 significant statements), inadequate textbooks (1 significant statement), and inadequate furniture in some schools which makes teaching and learning difficult (8 significant statements). Additionally, it was discovered that the majority of mentors in the schools had little knowledge of what supported teaching in schools entailed (16 significant statements). Thus the mentors found it challenging to give student-teachers the support and direction they needed.

Again, it was found that in many instances, mentors were unfamiliar with the new Bachelor of Education Curriculum, which made it challenging for them to offer effective and knowledgeable mentorship. The new Bachelor of Education Curriculum provided the basis for Supported Teaching in Schools.

Some college tutors did not provide student-teachers with enough assistance through reflection (2 significant statements).

However, it was possible for majority of college tutors to guide their student-teachers through reflection. Few college tutors were unable to offer student-student teachers guided reflection on a weekly basis for the period of six weeks of school visits. Another issue raised by the student-teachers was the short time allotted for the school visits (1 significant statements). Table 1 is a list of the main themes, key phrases, and frequency of codes of student-teachers' challenges.

Table 1. List of themes, key phrases, and frequency of codes of student-teachers' challenges.

Theme	Significant statement	frequency
College related challenges	Inadequate help from college tutors	2
	Inadequate time allocated for STS	1
Mentor Knowledge of curriculum	Mentor had no knowledge of new curriculum	6
Mentor Knowledge of STS	Mentor had no knowledge of STS	16
	Mentor absenteeism	4
	Mentor inability to provide information	3
Mentor attitude	Mentor lateness	9
	Mentor had no time for student-teachers	2
	Mentor failed to provide assistance	3
	Inadequate furniture	8
	Lack of teachers (mentors)	2
Partner school related challenges	No curriculum materials	3
	Inadequate TLMs	7
	Inadequate textbooks	1

6. Discussion

6.1. Mentor Behaviour and Attitudes

From the results, it was evident that most mentors did not spend much time with student teachers, and occasionally, mentors were absent or arrive late to school.

"Mentor wasn't always available and... also didn't arrive at school on time for us to get our data" (STS015).
"Some of the mentors from the basic schools didn't have time for us" (STS017).

Once more, several mentors were unable to give student-teachers the answers to their queries. This could make prospective teachers feel discouraged and frustrated. It was obvious from the following excerpts that some mentors must not have understood their inquiries.

"Some teachers, too, will ask you questions rather than provide answers when you ask them" (STS012).
"When asked questions, mentors don't always mind you, but some of them became tired of us" (STS010).

According to Eby et al [29], 17% of the challenges that proteges encountered had to do with mentor competency issues and mentor neglect. However, Garza and Harter [30], reported that pre-service teachers thought their mentors were very kind, encouraging, and aggressive. Again, some participants also thought their mentors were dependable, encouraging, supporting, and positive.

According to Rami [31], mentor absenteeism was attributed to activities such as the requirement to attend urgent meetings, ad hoc school activities, or personal reasons, among other demands on their time. School structure and organization are the biggest hindrances to effective mentoring, particularly in terms of when beginners and mentors can meet and interact, have intelligent talks, or how physically accessible they are to one another in the workplace [31]. Any successful teacher mentorship program must have mentors who are available to work with pre-service teachers.

The role of a mentor is to assist a new teacher in successfully completing his or her initial teaching experience by spending time in observing, providing comments, sharing best practices, facilitating discussions, and gaining professional experience [32]. A successful mentoring process demonstrates effective preparation, continuity, monitoring, and feedback, as well as reflexivity [32]. This kind of focused engagement aids student-teachers in their career accomplishment and enhances the outcomes of their work over time [33, 32].

6.2. Challenges Associated with Partner Schools and Colleges

The challenges that were connected to the partner schools generally were inadequate furniture and teaching and learning resources, such as textbooks and curriculum materials that student-teachers needed to enhance their learning. For instance, some student-teachers complained that the school's learning environment was not conducive due to the absence of tables and chairs (STS019).

"Because there was no furniture for them, it was difficult for them to participate in class" (STS014).
Most schools lack furniture for students, which hinders effective teaching and learning"(STS013).
The absence of teaching and learning resources, such as textbooks, was one issue I faced"(STS018).

Technology, instructional materials, and textbooks are vital components of every student's education. Lack of textbooks

and inferior instructional materials reduces students' learning potential [34].

Most teachers base their lessons on the topics covered in the textbooks they use. These textbooks and other resources provide the content that students are expected to learn [34]. Textbooks and instructional materials are commonly regarded to be vital and important to education since they are the main resources that schools utilize to give students access to the knowledge and skills they are supposed to learn [34].

The purpose of supported teaching in schools may be impacted by the lack of teaching and learning materials. According to Ndirangu and Udoto [35], having a sufficient amount of resources enhances the effectiveness of learning experiences.

In very few instances, college tutors were not able to guide student teachers through their reflection after school visits.

The college tutors did not provide us with enough assistance to complete the reflection"(STS006).

Some of the tutors didn't encourage us to talk about things during reflection (STS007).

One of the crucial steps in teacher education is reflective teaching practice [36]. It encourages both teachers and students to grow a variety of abilities like judgment, metacognition, and logical reasoning. Reflective activity participation is crucial, especially for student instructors. Reflective practice in the practicum environment helps student-teachers look for ways to enhance their instruction [37]. Effective teachers regularly engage in reflection as a process of self-examination and self-evaluation to enhance their professional skills. Reflective thinking encourages instructors to act proactively rather than reactively and arbitrarily [38].

As seen by the comment:

*"there were no enough teachers to walk us through what we were supposed to be doing" (*STS018).

Student-teachers complained that, in a relatively small number of schools there weren't enough mentors for them.

6.3. Mentor Knowledge of STS and Curriculum Expertise

The fact that mentors didn't seem to know enough about the STS program was one of the biggest problems student teachers encountered. The comments that followed made this clear:

"The lead mentor and mentors lack expertise of STS" (STS001).

"Some mentors are unaware of some of the questions we pose" (STS018).

"Some teachers struggle with it because they lack knowledge about it" (STS012).

"Less STS experience for mentors and lead mentors" (STS007).

Inadequate knowledge of the new curriculum by mentors presented another difficulty. This was because the STS course was designed based on the revised Basic School Curriculum.

"Some teachers are unfamiliar with the new curriculum"

(STS014).

The teachers are not aware of the new curriculum's requirements"(STS011).

"The mentors at the entry level lack a thorough understanding of the course material" (STS012).

"Many of our mentors struggle to mentor us because they don't even understand the new curriculum" (STS015).

Hall, Draper, Smith, and Bullough [39] found that several issues such as unclear expectations of their duties and responsibilities, a lack of training on how to support pre-service teachers might have an impact on mentors' mentoring abilities.

7. Conclusion

The majority of the challenges encountered by student-teachers were caused by the attitude of the mentors such as mentor absenteeism, mentor lateness, mentor inability to provide student teachers with necessary information they needed, mentor inability to assist student-teachers, and mentor's lack of devotion for student-teachers.

Furthermore, other challenges were partner school related problems, college-related problem, inadequate mentor knowledge of the curriculum, and inadequate mentor knowledge of supported teaching in schools (STS). The partner school related challenges identified were: lack of mentors, inadequate curricular materials, inadequate teaching and learning materials, inadequate textbooks, and inadequate furniture in some schools.

It was found that majority of the mentors in the partner schools had little knowledge of what supported teaching in schools entailed. Thus the mentors found it challenging to give student-teachers the support they needed. In many instances, mentors were unfamiliar with the new Bachelor of Education Curriculum, which made it challenging for them to offer effective and knowledgeable mentorship. Some college tutors could not provide student-teachers with enough assistance through reflection.

For mentoring to be successful, mentors must have the knowledge and skills in teaching in line with the demands of the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework (NTECF). Mentors must have an in-depth knowledge of the new Bachelor of education curriculum, and of pre-service teachers' learning to teach in order to identify areas where their diagnostic mentoring should be directed.

Colleges of education and other teacher education institutions need to pay attention to the complicated and demanding nature of the mentorship role. Mentoring student-teachers should involve observing, co-planning, analysing students' work, and gathering and analysing instructional data in the classroom. The mentor's responsibilities also include serving as a motivator, source of feedback, role model, and supporter [40]. Additionally, mentor responsibilities involve working with teacher education institutions, providing orientation, instruction, and assistance to student-teachers [41, 42].

Therefore, mentors must be aware of their duties and

responsibilities during the mentoring process if they want pre-service teachers to benefit from supported teaching. Additionally, there is the need for educational institutions to explicitly acknowledge the mentors' significance and take steps to enhance their knowledge. Colleges of education should provide chances for mentors to participate in professional development workshops in order to advance their responsibilities. In order to build effective, professional relationships, there should be a strong school-college partnership between the partner schools and the Colleges of Education.

Colleges of education must offer more organized guidance on supported teaching to mentors and student-teachers alike through professional development programs [42]. Collaboration and strong interpersonal and professional relationships between mentors and pre-service teachers is very crucial in ensuring successful mentoring. Student teachers must be receptive to criticism and support as mentors try to guide them. The curriculum materials needed by student-teachers for a successful supported teaching should be provided by teacher education institutions.

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